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The Effect of Transcribing on Elementary Iranian EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension

Mohammad Afsharrad
MA in TEFL from Semnan University, Iran. Office of Education, Joghatay and TICE English School, Sabzevar, Khorasan Razavi, Iran.
mohammadafshar@live.com

Asghar Moulavi Nafchi
Senior Lecturer, English Language and Literature Department, Hakim Sabzevari University, Iran.
a.moulavi.n@gmail.com; a.moulavi@hsu.ac.ir

Abstract

This study is motivated by the gap existing between theory and practice in teaching listening. Most of the techniques used to teach listening put more emphasis on top-down processing while listeners' problems are more of perceptive ones (bottom-up). In order to address the pervasive decoding problem in listening, this study suggests using transcribing exercise as an input enhancement device and investigates its effect on beginning learners' listening ability. To this end, 31 learners participated in the study. The control group did not have any transcribing practice while the experimental group received transcribing exercise. In the data analysis step, an independent samples *t* test was employed to compare the two groups. The results show that transcribing has a significant positive effect on beginning learners' listening comprehension. The findings of the study as well as advantages of transcribing exercise are discussed. Implications of the study and scope for future research are also addressed.

Keywords: elementary EFL learners, input enhancement, listening comprehension, teaching listening, transcribing

A. Introduction

Among the four major language skills, listening is probably the most fundamental one (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). It builds the foundation for and facilitates learning other language skills especially speaking (Lundsteen, 1979; Oxford, 1990). In fact, listening is a prerequisite to speaking. Chastain (1988) states that in the process of language learning, perception precedes production and sets the foundation for the speaking skill. Moreover, listening plays a crucial role in developing overall language proficiency (Morley, 1995). Another main reason which reveals the importance of listening skill is that it is the most widely used skill in real life (Morley, 2001; Rost, 2001). Listening takes a considerable amount of verbal communication time. Adults spend 40-50% of the communication time on listening, 25-30% on speaking, 9% on writing, and 11-16% on reading Rivers as cited in Gilman & Moody (1984).

Despite its crucial importance, listening used to be overlooked especially in the early period of English Language Teaching (ELT) when the main focus was on grammar and written skills. It did not receive the due attention until recently since, firstly, knowing a language was defined in terms of being able to produce that language, not comprehend it (Chastain, 1988; Nunan, 1999). Nunan (1999) believes that "listening is the Cinderella skill… overlooked by its elder sister, speaking."

Secondly, prior to the work of such scholars as Brown (as cited in Nunan, 1999) who proved the importance of oral skills and also under the inspiration of L1 research, it was taken for granted that oral skills, listening and speaking, were learned automatically when learners were exposed to the language.

The last but not least reason why listening is neglected is the nature of the output it produces. Chastain (1988) asserts that "the listening comprehension process is internal and thus not subject to direct, external observation, examination and correction. Therefore, language teachers and learners tend to overlook its prerequisite importance in language learning because there is no immediate observable output."

After having been neglected for a long time, listening has recently come into fashion (Brown, 1990; Oxford, 1993; Morley, 1990; Morley, 1995). Celce-Murcia (1991) states that "the importance of listening comprehension in language learning and language teaching has moved from a status of incidental and peripheral importance to a status of significance and central importance". Researchers also gradually started to espouse the belief that listening should not be considered as a skill that is acquired naturally by exposure, but be seen as a skill that can be taught and assessed systematically (Rixon, 1986; Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Flowerdew, 1994; Nunan & Miller, 1996; Rost, 1990; Rost, 1994; Rost, 2002; Ur, 1996; White, 1998).

Today, many books have been written and different conferences have been held claiming to address this complex skill and help learners develop their listening ability. Furthermore, to improve listening, different techniques have

been proposed (Kiany & Shiramiri, 2002). For example, Ur (1991) and Rost (1991) have presented more than 30 activities and exercises for teaching listening.

However, most techniques suggested for improving listening skill share the same problem. In these techniques top-down processing, listening for gist, and listening strategies have been emphasized downplaying the role of bottom-up processes. Moreover, these techniques either provide learners with practicing comprehension or test their listening rather than teaching them something which improves their performance in listening (Field, 2000).

Giving learners more practice by emphasizing repeated encounters has some disadvantages. The first disadvantage is that although an increase in the number of listening experiences may help some learners, there is no guarantee that it helps all of them. Repeated exposure to different listening practices for learners who have not been taught how to deal with them may turn to unnerving experiences for them. Field (2008) stated that "somebody who is a weak listener at the outset might well become increasingly demoralised by their lack of perceptible progress." He believes that using extensive practice of listening is an opportunity when learners receive some training in the basics of listening. Otherwise, it's a threat which results in fossilization of inefficient techniques.

Another disadvantage is that contribution of background knowledge to comprehension depends on learners' ability to use bottom-up processes effectively. In Mayberry's (2006) words,

"…low-level processes, affected by L1 [first language] phonemic interference and unfamiliarity with segmentation rules, prevent learners from being able to use any prior knowledge they have of the L1 and L2 (cognate recognition, grammatical and lexical contexts, etc.) in listening tasks" (p. 227).

Like the techniques which provide learners with practice, the techniques which test listening rather than teaching it are not flawless. They test learners' listening before teaching it. It is axiomatic that teaching a linguistic point should precede testing it (Field, 2008).

Based on psycholinguistic research, the aforementioned techniques are in contrast with the best supported model of listening comprehension in which bottom-up processing is emphasized (Field, 1999; Lindfield, Wingfield, & Goodglass, 1999).

Considering many current techniques used to teach listening Wilson (2003) claims that:

…an excessive focus on meaning, either through extra vocabulary learning or additional listening practice, will not necessarily solve the listening comprehension problems of many students. So, we still need to find an approach to teaching listening that strikes a balance between attention to form and attention to meaning.

Acknowledging the role of top-down processing, Wilson (2003) also states that "…the learners' ultimate aim is to rely less on contextual guesswork,

and more on hearing what was actually said. Current EFL teaching has tended to overlook this point."

Although it is of utmost importance, listening is not an easy skill to develop. Researchers generally agree that language learners experience difficulties while listening to the target language. To address these difficulties, Field (2000) believes that, as the first step, we should determine "which sub-skills are giving rise to problems of understanding, then devise micro-exercises to practice them."

In a study trying to find the sources of difficulties that EFL listeners encountered while listening, Goh (2000) listed 10 problems, out of which 5 were related to perceptual processing. Tsui & Fullilove (1998), in one of the most extensive studies in the area of bottom-up/ top-down processing, concluded that low-level listeners used more of top-down processes. They did so to compensate for perception problems, bottom-up processes.

In another study, Koster (1987) found that nonnative subjects' use of context was almost the same as that of native subjects. However, according to Randall (2007), native subjects' use of top-down processes rests on highly proceduralised bottom-up ones which are not automatic for nonnative learners. Considering the findings of these studies, we can conclude that the effectiveness of top-down processes depends on well-established bottom-up ones.

The aforementioned highlight the necessity for techniques which reduce the gap between theory and practice and which are tailored to the needs of learners. To this end, the current study suggests transcribing exercise and examines its effect on beginning learners' listening ability. The study sets out to find an answer to the following research question:

"Does transcribing have a significant effect on elementary Iranian EFL learners' listening ability?"

B. Research Methodology

1. Participants

The participants of this study were 31 females, aged 14-16, who were attending TICE Language School in Sabzevar, Iran. After taking a standardized placement test (including four parts: vocabulary, grammar, reading, and speaking) given by the institute, they were enrolled in the first level (elementary) of a series of general English courses. However, to ensure participants' homogeneity in terms of listening skill, they were also given a listening pretest on the first session by the researcher. The results of the test revealed that the two groups were homogeneous (statistics are provided in the Results and Discussion section of the paper).

The participants were then randomly assigned to two groups of control (N=15) and experimental (N=16). The purpose and procedure of the study as well as the confidentiality of the collected data were explained to all participants on the first session. They were also given the right to opt out of the study

whenever they wanted. Each group met for 27 sessions. There were three sessions each week and each session lasted for two hours with a 10-minute break time in the middle. The researcher was the teacher of both control and experimental groups.

The participants of the study had learned English through print in the formal educational system of Iran. In mainstream schools of Iran, English instruction is limited to teaching reading and sentence-level writing. Therefore, the participants had not received any systematic instruction on oral skills.

2. Instrument

The instrument used for the study was a listening test which served as both pre- and posttest. The test was devised by the researcher using subjects' course book, *"Top Notch Fundamentals"* by Saslow & Ascher (2012), and an additional book, *"Tactics for Listening (basic)"* by Richards (2010) which was for elementary level and covered almost similar topics as participants' course book. After being devised, the test was reviewed for face and content validity by two qualified English teachers holding MA in TEFL and teaching the same book. One semester before the onset of the study, the instrument was pilot-tested with a sample (N=30) similar to the participants of the study. The Cronbach's Alpha was employed to compute the reliability of the test. The reliability index for the test turned out to be 0.82.

The listening test had six sections. Table 1 presents the number of items and time dedicated to each section of the listening test. The speakers of the listening test were both female and male who spoke in a standard American English accent.

Table 1

Number of Items and Time Dedicated to Each Section of the Listening Posttest

	Listening 1	Listening 2	Listening 3	Listening 4	Listening 5	Listening 6	total
No. of items	6	4	6	33	12	12	73
Time (in seconds)	75	95	144	65	61	150	590

3. Procedure

First, the pretest was administered on the first session. At the beginning of the exam the test-takers were given some instructions on how to do the test. The exam took about 15 minutes and the audio file was played only once for the test-takers.

The next session, the experiment started and lasted for 25 sessions. During the experiment, the experimental group was assigned to transcribe (as their homework) the listening sections and the videos of each unit of their

course book (the learners did not have access to the script of these parts). They were instructed to listen sentence by sentence with listening each sentence 2-4 times before moving on to the next sentence. The control group was assigned to listen to/ watch the same files. However, they did not have any transcription exercise. Instead, to ensure they listen/watch as many times as the experimental group, they were given as their homework some multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank exercises devised by the researcher. They were told to listen to the audio/video files 2-4 times in order to complete the exercises.

During the experiment, each session started with checking learner's homework in both experimental and control groups. To check the experimental group's homework, the teacher called one student at a time to read her transcription aloud and asked others to check their transcriptions. Whenever the reader made a mistake, other students corrected her. If learners did not understand a word/phrase, the teacher played that part again and asked them to listen carefully in order to hear that part correctly. If the learners could not understand in the second playing, the teacher provided the correct word(s) for them.

The class in the control group started with checking the learners' homework. The teacher asked one student at a time to read one question and answer it. Other students were asked to listen carefully and check their answers. If they had made a mistake the teacher played the related part of the audio/video file and asked them to correct their mistake. If they couldn't do so after listening two times, they teacher provided the correct answer for them.

After 25 sessions, the posttest was given to the learners on Session 26. Then the papers were scored and the data were entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 19) for analysis.

4. Data Analysis

In order to decide on the statistical procedure to compare the means of the control and experimental groups, the data were examined for normality of distribution through Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests and for homogeneity of variances through Levene's test. The results of these tests revealed that the data followed a normal distribution and had homogeneous variances. Consequently, an independent samples *t* test was employed for comparing the two groups.

C. Findings and Discussion

Performance in the experimental condition relative to the control condition in pretest and posttest is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Listening Pretest and Posttest

	Group	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation
Listening pretest	Experimental	16	7	13	10.50	0.46	1.86
	Control	15	4	13	9.73	0.80	3.12
Listening posttest	Experimental	16	54	71	64.87	1.13	4.55
	Control	15	48	70	56.66	1.56	6.07

Before the onset of the study an independent samples t test was conducted to determine whether the two groups were homogeneous. The results revealed that the difference between the two groups had not been statistically significant prior to the intervention, t (29) = 0.84, p = 0.20, *CI* = -1.13, 2.67.

As Table 2 shows the two groups had different means after the treatment. However, to find out how much confidence we can have in claiming a true difference, an independent samples *t* test was employed. The results of the *t* test, presented in Table 3, indicated that the difference between the two groups was highly significant. Moreover, the effect size for the difference between the two groups in posttest was large (d= 1.66).

Table 3
Results of Independent Samples t Test for Listening Posttest

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
Listening	Equal variances assumed	4.27	29	.00	8.20	1.92	4.27	12.13
	Equal variances not assumed	4.23	25.92	.00	8.20	1.93	4.22	12.19

Note. *CI*= confidence interval, *LL*= lower limit, *UL*= upper limit.

Simply put, based on the results, the participants in the experimental group outperformed their counterparts in the control group. This supports the idea that transcribing affects beginning learners' listening ability positively. Considering transcribing exercise as an input enhancement activity, the findings also lend support to the belief that "intentionally focused attention may be a practical (though not theoretical) necessity for successful language learning" (Schmidt, 2001). The learners in the experimental group of this study who

deliberately attended to the aural input through transcribing exercise were more successful in listening comprehension than those who did not. Moreover, the results provide evidence in favor of Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1995). The hypothesis proposes that learners need to consciously attend to input which is necessary for conversion of input to intake which may eventually be integrated in learner's interlanguage.

The findings also confirm the results of two recent studies investigating the effect of input enhancement on listening. Afsharrad & Sadeghi Benis (2014) investigated the effect of transcribing (which draws learners attention to incoming aural stimuli) on beginning learners' listening ability at phoneme level. The results of their study revealed a positive effect for transcribing on the learners' phonemic perception. In other words, learners who had transcribing exercise excelled those who didn't in perceiving problematic phonemes for Persian learners of English. Better performance of learners in listening comprehension in the current study may have been mediated by their better perception of problematic English phonemes. In other words, better listening ability of the learners in the experimental group of this study could be a result of their better perception of problematic phonemes which, in turn, may lead to overall improvement in listening ability.

In a similar study, Rezaei & Hashim (2013) identified 10 most frequently used listening micro skills (including discriminating distinctive sounds) and investigated the effect of raising learners' awareness of these micro skills on their listening comprehension. They used explicit instruction to raise learners' consciousness. Their results are in line with those of the current study. That is, input enhancement results in improved listening comprehension.

In addition to improving listening ability, transcription seems to have other advantages:

- It helps reduce the teacher-centeredness of listening courses. The listening class is mostly under the teacher's control. It is the teacher who operates the button of CD or cassette player and decides if replaying certain parts of the passage is necessary. S/he predicts problems and asks questions (Field, 2008). In this way, learners' individual differences are neglected. Some learners may have problems in specific sections in which others may not experience any difficulty and vice versa. Moreover, at times, the teacher may dwell overlong on sections which learners find easy. At other times, s/he may take a problematic section for granted and not spend enough time on it. By assigning transcribing as homework, teachers shoulder most of these responsibilities to learners and the learners move forward at their own pace. They decide which parts of the passage are causing perception problems and need to be replayed. In other words, through transcription learners gain more control over their listening processes, what Field (2008) suggests to be included in future approaches to listening.

- It changes the listening teacher's role from being to ask questions, play CD/tape, and provide learners with correct answer if learners failed to do so. The teacher becomes a facilitator who "encourages the class to compare pieces of information they have extracted for themselves from the passage" (Field, 2008). In fact teacher's answer (matching input to words) is the last resort which is called upon after the students have failed to perceive a part of the passage using their chances while transcribing.
- Transcribing assigned as homework is of more help to learners listening development than techniques based on comprehension approach to listening in which learners are required to answer questions according to what they have just heard. To progress in listening, Field (2008) suggests that "learners do much more of the listening work for themselves. It is by listening and re-listening and by testing hypotheses for themselves that learners progress; not by having the answers handed to them".
- Unlike the comprehension approach towards listening which is questioned by Field (2008) for emphasizing the product of listening, transcribing gives more weight to the process of listening rather than the final product. Instead of just testing learners' comprehension or providing learners with practice, it helps them focus on the incoming aural stimulus and perceive it. Therefore, transcribing can be considered as a technique based on the process approach to listening.
- Transcribing can be used as a diagnostic approach to listening suggested by Brown (1986) and Field (2008). It reveals the parts of the text that cause perception problems for learners. The best way to address the problems is giving dictations which contain multiple examples of the problematic feature (Field, 2008). Nonetheless, the problems experienced by learners are different especially when they do not share the same native language. Consequently, there is a need for an individualized diagnostic approach. Because of the similar procedures of dictation and transcribing, perhaps transcribing is both a good self-diagnosis device and a remedial exercise. After diagnosing the problematic parts, the subsequent transcribing exercises can be focused on the features causing trouble. Therefore, transcribing implements (Field, 2008) recommendation of having a reflective phase in listening sessions during which learners consider their own individual problems.
- Transcribing helps teachers create a balance between the three stages which are usually followed in listening classes: pre-listening, listening, and post-listening. In traditional comprehension approach classes more time is spend on the first stage which includes preparing learners for comprehending the passage which will be presented in the listening phase. This is achieved by teaching new vocabulary, activating background knowledge, etc. which result in anticipation of the information in the listening passage. On the contrary, by transcribing more time is dedicated to the second and third stages. Multiple

replays of the passage in listening stage results in diagnosing learners' problems which can serve as the basis for remedial work in the third stage, post-listening.

D. Conclusion

Many techniques devised to help learners improve their listening ability seem to be inappropriate since; they take a top-down view toward teaching listening and are devised to help learners use contextual clues and guesswork while most learners have decoding (bottom-up) problems and they either test or provide learners with additional practice while the aim is to teach learners.

This reflects the need for techniques with more emphasis on bottom-up primacy. In this study I proposed transcribing, an input enhancement device, and investigated its effect on a sample of novice learners. The results revealed that, apart from many other advantages, transcribing has a highly positive effect on beginning learners' listening ability. Therefore, teachers of elementary levels are advised to use this technique for helping beginning learners with their listening ability.

1. Implications

The most important implication of the present study is that it supports techniques which take a bottom-up view towards listening skill. Based on the findings of this study, focusing on the bottom-up processes at the lowest level is a good way of teaching listening to novice learners of English. The technique suggested by this study to focus on low-level processes is transcribing. Considering the aforementioned advantages of transcribing, listening teachers are recommended to assign transcribing as homework which lets learners find and practice their own difficulties. In the case of more proficient learners who have a limited number of difficulties, the teacher can make a list of the most frequent problems which can be used as the basis for gathering a collection including those examples. This helps learners face various examples of the problematic features in different contexts which, in turn, helps them in better perception of the features in future encounters. Instead of using materials which only provide learners with practice or test learners' listening, materials producers are also recommended to include more techniques based on bottom-up primacy including transcribing.

2. Limitations and Further Research

The first limitation of the study is that the participants of the current study were only females. This makes generalizing the findings to a population of males not entirely accurate before the results are confirmed by a replication of the study with such a sample.

The next limitation to be captured by future research is that this study focused on only beginners. Determining the effect of transcribing on learners at

higher levels requires further research. My speculation is that the higher the learners' level is, the less the effect of transcribing will become. It makes proficient learners so focused on details and small pieces of the text that they fail to see the big picture. In other words, they cannot see the forest for the trees. Moreover, it violates one of the features of the aural input (i.e., its transitory nature). It makes learners dependent on listening more than one time in order to get what the text was about. This rarely happens in real world situations. However, this (negative relationship between transcribing and proficiency level) remains a speculation, unless it is confirmed by further research.

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